In-Ground or In a Pot?

We keep all of our nursery stock in 20 gallon pots in a south facing full sun location. With a 6+ foot tall tree and the pot filled with soil-less potting mix (Miracle Gro Potting Mix, Farard 52 etc.) the pot can be moved by one or two people. A hand cart makes the job even easier. Moving the tree is important because it will need to spend it's winter months (late November thru mid-May here in North Jersey with Hardiness Zone 7a) in the garage or someplace that is dark, gets below 35°F and stays above 15° F. It's been our experience that a potted fig tree can withstand 15°F without dieback. Our fig trees are frozen solid most of the winter. Some people say 5°F is minimum. We have not let our plants drop below 15°F.

Moving the fig tree outdoors during the very early spring gives it a longer growing season and the possibility of a greater yield of figs. Care must be taken that the newly opened buds not be exposed to frost. The fig tree must be brought back into the garage when there is a frost warning or when the night time temperature is forecast to be 38°F or below. Moving a fig tree into and out of the garage based on the weather is called doing the "Fig Shuffle" by fig tree aficionados. Leaving your fig tree indoors until the danger of frost has past is ok too.

If your plan is to plant your fig tree in-ground pick a south facing full sun location. Two feet from a south facing brick wall is ideal. The tree will need to be bound and wrapped in the fall. If you choose not to "winterize" your fig tree and there is a cold winter (below 5°F) there is a good chance the fig tree will die back to the ground. If

the roots survive, new branches can grow from the ground and most likely you will not get fruit for one maybe two seasons. Winterizing is the way to go if your fig tree is in ground.

Transplanting

We do all of our transplanting in the early spring or the late fall after the leaves have fallen off. It's the best time to do it and will result in the minimum stress on the tree. If it's necessary to transplant a leafed out fig tree during the warm summer months to an in-ground location it should be done during a cloudy period. Keep the fig tree well watered. Shade the tree for a week if possible. If transplanting your fig to to a container during summer, the container should be kept in shade for a week to allow the plant to acclimate.

For in-ground trees, in the evening, simply dig a hole deep enough to accommodate the size of the pot, tip the pot on its side and knock the fig tree out by hitting the bottom and gently pulling on the trunk. Put the tree with all of the soil from the pot in the hole and fill with the remaining dirt where required. Disturb the root ball as little as possible. Do not bury the fig tree any deeper than it is in the pot. The level of the soil in the pot should match the top of the soil in the hole. Soak with water a couple times a day for 2-3 days and less later as the fig tree recovers from the transplanting.

If you will keep your fig tree in a pot, start in the evening, fill the pot (20 gallon is best) with the soil-less potting mix of your choice to within 2" of the top. Dig a hole big enough to accommodate the plant. Remove the tree from the pot, put the fig tree, with all of the soil from the pot, into the hole and fill with the remaining soil where required. Disturb the root ball as little as possible. The level of the soil in the original pot should match the top of the soil in the new pot. Dont bury the trunk any deeper than it is in the original pot. Water the fig tree several times until water is coming out of the drain holes. Apply 1-2 " of pine bark mulch to the top of the soil to reduce evaporation. Water daily for a couple days and then check the soil with a moisture meter to determine when it needs water next.

During the summer our fig trees grow roots out of the holes in the sides of their pots and into the soil. Our nursery containers have a flat bottom where the holes are located at the lowest part of the side of the pot. Its easy to see when the roots are growing out of the pot and into the soil. These roots stabilize the pots and give the fig trees access to more water and nutrients during the growing season. In the fall after the leaves have dropped we cut the roots at the holes and move the pots into storage.

Watering

In-ground fig trees should not be planted in a location where there is standing water. An in-ground fig tree has the advantage that its root system can spread out and down to search for water. During the summer months water beneath the tree when the soil is dry.

We like to use a moisture meter with our potted figs to tell us when they need water. When it's very hot your fig trees may need watering every day. Larger pots generally require less times watering than smaller pots.

Fertilizing

In the spring we scoop out the mulch, apply Osmocote Plus (available in our "Fig Tree Accessories" tab) on top of the soil, put the mulch back on and water as ususual. Osmocote Plus is a time released fertilizer with micro nutrients that can last all summer.

In the fall a quarter cup of lime powder made from dolomite (not quick release lime) can be added under the mulch of a 20 gallon pot and watered in. Figs grow best in an alkaline soil. Alkaline is defined as having a ph greater that 7.

In-ground fig trees can be fertilized with a balanced fertilizer such as 15-15-15. Follow the directions on the package. Balanced means the NPK (nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium) numbers are equal.

Winter Care

A potted fig tree should be brought indoors after the first frost and when all of the leaves have fallen off the tree. Here in North Jersey we bring them in at the end of November. Water very lightly (monthly) during the winter to keep the soil moist when it's not frozen. Figs require a dormant period where the temperature is kept below 35F and above 15F with very little light. Many fruits require this dormant period. This is why we don't see apple orchards in Florida. All of our fig trees are moved into our garage at the end of November and taken out again late April or early May.

To keep an in-ground fig tree warm during winter it must be insulated to the ground. The ground has latent heat available during the winter and can keep the tree from dropping to dangerous temperatures. One way to keep accomplish this is by binding the tree with rope slowly over a couple days, then wrapping the fig tree with burlap and filling the spaces with dry leaves or hay. Wrap this completely with tar paper (not plastic) and be sure it goes all the way to the ground. Create an apron with the tar paper at the base and hold it down with bricks or pile several inches of dirt all the way around so it does not blow away.

The below image is a hand out from the now closed Belleclaire Nursery out on Long island. They specialized in fig trees and were in business for many years. This is how they recommended their customers wrap their in-ground trees. Wrapping your tree does not guarantee that there won't be die-back however it is better than leaving the tree exposed. We do not have any in-ground trees here at the farm.

Root Pruning for Potted Fig Trees

Every 3-4 years a potted fig tree must be root pruned. There will be a notable decline in growth and fig production signaling its time to do this. In the fall after the leaves have fallen off lay the tree on its side and pull it from the pot. Cut, with sharp sheers, about 1/4 of the root ball away from the sides and bottom. The smaller roots are the feeder roots so if possible cut away the larger roots to allow space for more feeder root growth. Add potting mix to the pot and replant the tree. The mix should fill the space where the pruned roots used to be. Add lime and mulch as you would normally do in the fall and water. Then put the tree away for the winter. In the spring add fertilizer as should be done every year.

Pests

For squirrels, raccoons, opossums, skunks and other four legged animals the best thing to do is follow your local ordinances and trap and remove them. Squirrels, raccoons and opossums will break off the limbs of your trees as they climb up and down them looking for figs. They will pick every fig off of a tree in a couple days. Do not waste time if you suspect they are present. Deer will normally not bother figs trees because they are allergic to the sap. We use green Organza bags on our figs to stop the birds from pecking holes in them. We put a green Organza bag on each fig as it starts to ripen and only remove it after the fig has been picked.

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